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ABSTRACT

Since ninety percent of high school graduates will enter the work world, the need for "well grounded" English composition courses, or those with appropriate channels of community feedback, is apparent. A survey of five levels of educators in Lane County, Oregon, reveals a discrepancy within the group concerning the importance of specific composition skills, as well as an inconsistency between what skills workers and educators valued most highly. Comprehensive needs assessment should provide the foundation for curriculum design in composition courses. Methods of obtaining feedback include surveying the needs of students, soliciting the opinions of former students, and utilizing advisory committees consisting of both members of the business community and recent graduates. To ensure a systematic course of study, the advisory board should include educators from levels above and below that being taught. (KS)

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Communication on the Job: AC, DC, and Well Grounded

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Communication on the Job:
AC, DC, and Well Grounded

Jeane L. Dille

AC and DC are electrical energy systems which have serious consequences when the system is not well grounded. So it is with any other subject or course. No matter what the subject matter is, serious are the consequences if the course does not have a feedback loop--if it is not well grounded. If the course content does not meet the student's needs and the level of need, serious consequences can ensue. Serious can mean boredom, discipline problems, dropout! But even more serious, those communications courses designed to equip the student with job-entry-level skills so that he can earn a living may be inadequate, inappropriate--or both! What I wish to share with you are not just what the nonacademic student in Lane County, Oregon considers most important in composition skills.[1] I would like to suggest some ideas which can be adopted or adapted to bring the content of your course--whatever it is--up-to-date and well grounded.

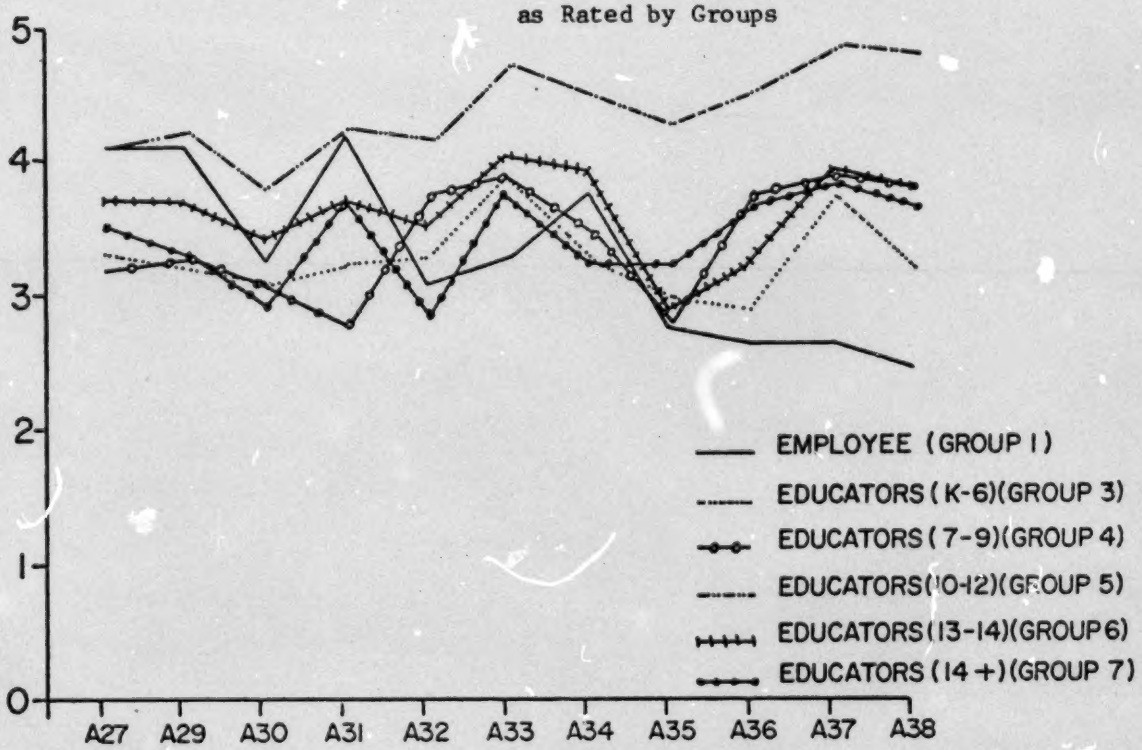
That expository writing is the style for business, I do not question. Expository writing meets the needs of academic or transfer students when they are required to produce term papers, reports, and theses. On this we can agree. But those who are familiar with the trends of the future recognize the projection that by 1990, only 10 percent of existing jobs will require a college degree.[2] So, the crucial information for the well grounded instructor is: "What does the nonacademic, general, terminal, vocational, non-transfer, or service employee need?" This is the group which will comprise

up to 90 percent of our student population.

There are fewer than half-a-dozen studies on record of what the non-academic, general student requires in composition skills. But a survey of what five levels of educators in Lane County, Oregon rated important composition skills to job-entry-level industrial mechanics looks something like five blind men describing an elephant, as shown by Chart I below:

Chart I

Importance of Communication Tasks
as Rated by Groups



But why the concern about industrial mechanics? Industrial mechanics are described in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. And statistics on the increasing job market for industrial mechanics are included in the manpower data banks of most states. Industrial mechanics include: appliance repair-

men, radio technicians, electronics and radio repairmen, construction workers, air conditioning and refrigeration mechanics, auto mechanics, diesel mechanics, heavy equipment maintenance workers, welders, and aircraft repairmen--among others. In short, industrial mechanics can represent the general, nonacademic, or vocational population.

For the purposes of a study to find out what composition skills are considered important, educators in the Oregon survey were divided into groups: kindergarten through grade 6, grades 7-9, grades 10-12, grades 13-14 (the two-year, comprehensive community college), and 14+ (the university level). The only generalization one can draw from the results of the study is that the nearer the student approaches job-entry level, the more aware instructors at that level are of the student's composition needs and the level of those needs!

Another unique aspect of this study is that it revolves around the philosophy that the job-entry-level individual can tell what his communication needs are. When asked in an objective, understandable, nonthreatening manner, the individual is not only able to express his needs, but he is also articulate. In the following charts:

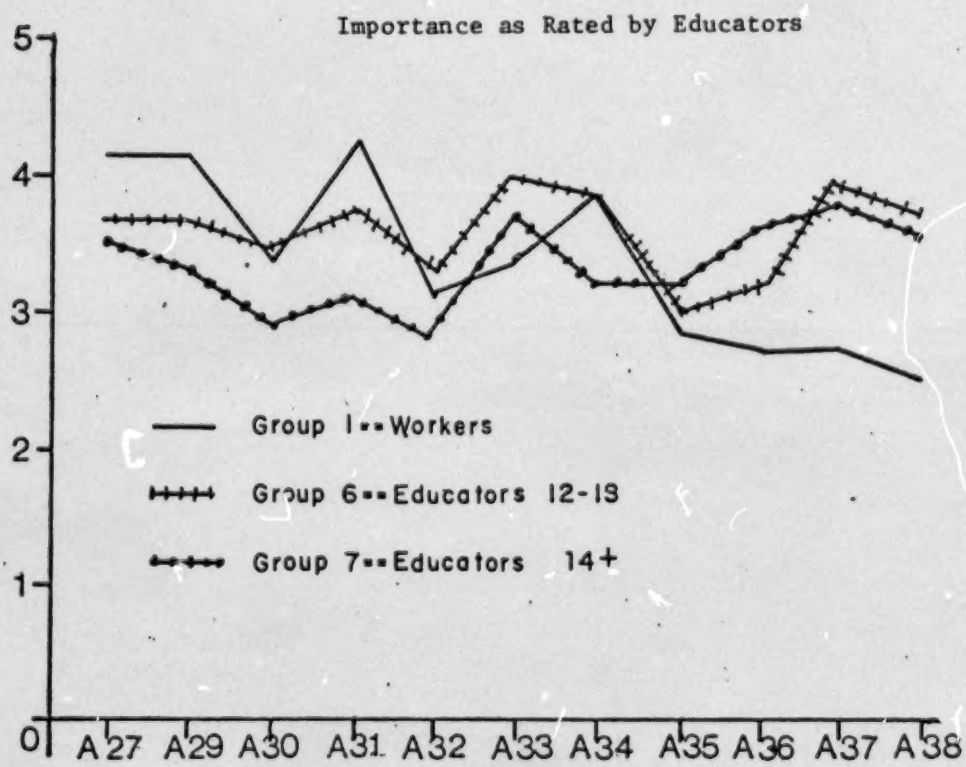
5 represents NECESSARY FOR GETTING JOB AND IN DAILY USE
4 represents NECESSARY IN DAILY USE
3 represents IMPORTANT, but not essential
2 represents HELPFUL
1 represents SELDOM NEEDED

The composition tasks tested for are as follows:

A-27 Writes logical reports which make sense
A-29 Gets the idea across in letters or reports
A-30 Uses acceptable grammar
A-31 Writes sequentially; that is, step-by-step logical description
A-32 Uses good spelling
A-33 Uses the terms of the trade in writing when necessary
A-34 Explains the terms of the trade to customer or others in writing when necessary

Probably the best news I can offer from the study is that the two-year, comprehensive community college instructors are more aware of the needs of the students than any of the groups surveyed. Although there were discrepancies, there were no significant differences between the two-year college instructors and the workers in their ratings of importance of the composition tasks. See Chart 2 below:

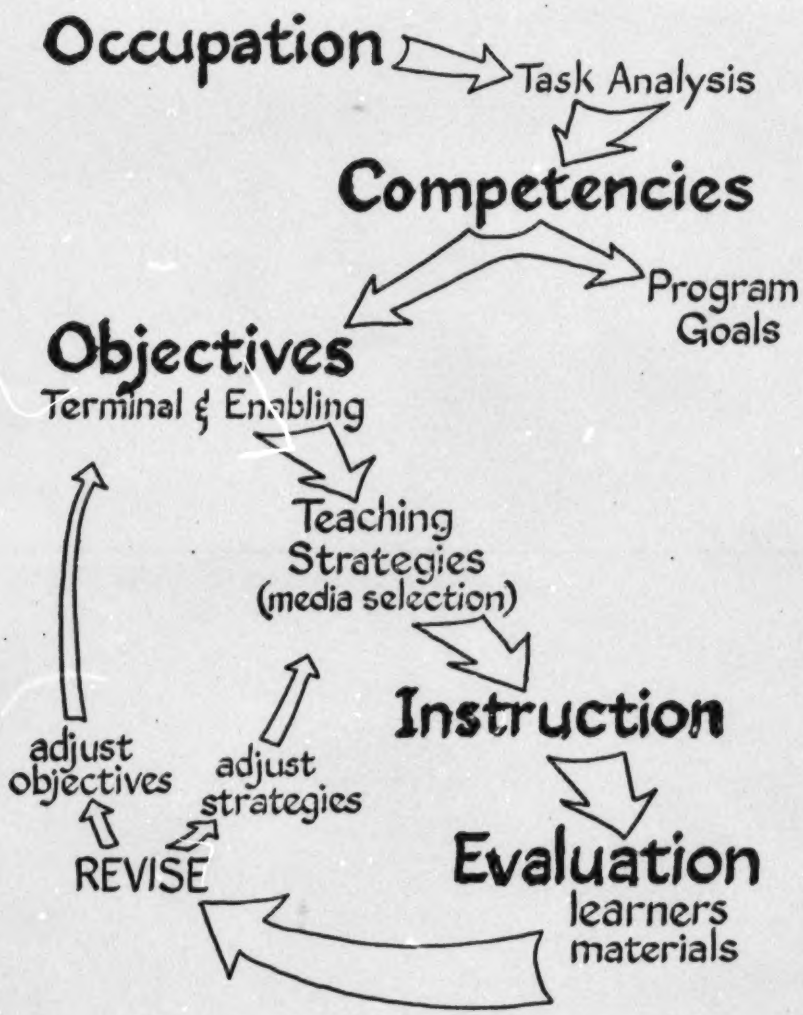
Chart 2



But this group of educators should have been close to the needs of workers. The college communication skills course was redesigned in 1970 on the basis of the results of a community needs assessment.[3] Such a needs assessment or survey of the needs of the population can be extremely helpful for feedback in keeping course offerings well grounded. Needs assessments provide

the goals for grounding the course. Feedback, or a survey, includes the "A, B, C of Instructional Objectives,"[4] as shown below in Chart 3.

Chart 3



Priscilla Hardin - Instructional Materials Development, 1976

To construct well grounded curricula, the goals lead to the objectives--those tasks which must be performed to accomplish identified goals. For almost all jobs, positions, or professions there are task analyses--lists of tasks the worker in that position must perform. Task analyses are probably available from the local state board of education. Specialists at the state

level compile task analyses and update them regularly. These task analyses list tasks required of the employee in that category. From updated task analyses, curricula are written. Unfortunately, we OFTEN write our course descriptions and our lesson plans based on what WE were taught, HOW we were taught, and how we manage to do the SAME THING in the SAME WAY without regard either to the changing needs of the student or to the changing demands of the society. This latter approach I label: "Things are more like they are here now than they have ever been before."

But when comparing workers' ratings of the importance of the composition tasks, which were taken from the job analyses, with the ratings assigned by instructors at the community college and the university levels to these skills, it is apparent that there is a discrepancy between what the workers considers NECESSARY or IMPORTANT and what educators consider NECESSARY or IMPORTANT. On Chart 2, there are areas which workers consider more important than do educators. But rather than extending the length of the course, one method for improving the grounding would be to place more emphasis on activities and assignments which job-entry-level workers consider more important than do educators and, at the same time, spend less time and effort on tasks or activities which the educator considers more important than do students. Redesigning a course to make it well grounded goes back to the goal in Chart 3: to equip an identified student audience with certain composition skills. Then, abstract from the appropriate task analysis what the student has to know or perform to achieve those goals. Find out from workers on the firing line how important the tasks listed on the task analysis are to him. Then structure the course accordingly. Such a methodology should result

in a better grounded composition course. It should be far better grounded than establishing priorities based upon previous courses taken and chatting with peers. (This is really more like navel-watching.)

Another methodology for making sure that the English composition course is well grounded is to utilize the services of an advisory committee. Such practices have long been used in career and vocational courses; the practice is becoming more widely accepted in the humanities. Most state board of education offices, The Ohio State University, or ERIC offer guidebooks giving a "cookbook approach" on how to select, organize, cooperate with, and--yes--manipulate an advisory committee. Such a committee not only gives direction such as information on future trends and the demands of the larger community, but it can also be an asset in course planning--especially implementation of budget priorities--as well as in student placement. The representation or membership of an advisory commitee is important. Helpful individuals who are in a position to contribute to your current classes could include recent graduates who can tell "how it is" out there--feedback--from the job market. Members of the business community who are potential employers of your students as well as members of the taxpaying community can point out areas of importance and future trends. Again, feedback!

Yet another aspect of the well grounded approach to English composition is the interdisciplinary approach. There is much research to prove that the interdisciplinary approach is more efficient and more effective. The interdisciplinary approach is a recurring trend in English institutions. If, on your campus or among your acquaintances are representatives of other courses or disciplines, it can be beneficial to find out what plans they have for your

mutual students. What are students doing in their other classes that you can work into your own lesson plans? How can courses complement one another? Does the appliance repair, the philosophy, or the electronics student have to write a report? Can't that report fulfill the requirements of both courses? It would give a "doubleganger" effect. Would that sharing strengthen the student's backgroumd in writing and give him better grounding in the composition skills he needs? Such a practice is not cheating. For instance, last year I did one project and, with the instructors' prior approval, received credit for it in four separate courses. The project was larger than I would have done for any one of the courses, but all of the requirements were fulfilled in accordance with prior conferences with the instructors. True, the project may have been graded on the basis of its weight rather than on its content. But I believe that the project was judged on the basis of its meeting the requirements of the various courses rather than on its weight. But WHY NOT permit the English composition assignment to carry over into another chosen field? Aren't composition skills supposed to permeate and complement all areas of life?

Still another approach to the well grounded English composition course is to include on the advisory committee members of education levels ABOVE and BELOW the level you teach. For instance, Chart 1 reflects what kindergarten-through-university-level educators consider important in composition tasks. Maybe we can get a clue why, from the middle school upward, students are experiencing difficulty in learning composition skills. At the kindergarten-through-grade-six level, composition skills are introduced. The university level offers the courses required of teachers for certification. Chart 4 indicates those composition tasks which educators consider less important than

do workers. ● Indicates items where educators underestimated the importance to workers. ✪ Indicates items where educators significantly underestimated the importance to workers.

Chart 4

	Importance Underestimated by				
	Group 3 Educators	Group 4 Educators	Group 5 Educators	Group 6 Educators	Group 7 Educators
A-27 Writes logical reports which make sense	●	✪		●	●
A-29 Gets the idea across in letters or reports	✪	●		●	●
A-30 Uses acceptable grammar	●	●			●
E-31 Writes sequentially; that is, step-by-step logical description	✪	✪		●	✪
E-32 Uses good spelling		●		●	●
A-33 Uses the terms of the trade in writing when necessary					●
A-34 Explains the terms of the trade to customers or others in writing when necessary	●	●			●

✪ Significant at the .05 level.

From Chart 4, it becomes apparent that with the exception of Group 5, educators grades 10-12, educators underestimate the importance of writing skills which are necessary elements of expository writing. Further, it is apparent from Chart 1 that Group 5, educators 10-12, realize the importance of these tasks to graduating seniors who are at job-entry level. It is also dreadfully apparent that Group 5 educators are trying to compensate for the nine years during which educators may have underestimated the importance--in four instances significantly underestimated the importance to workers--of these basic composition tasks.

We have discussed including on advisory committees: (1) members of the various levels of education, (2) former students now on the job, and (3)

members of the business community--all for the express purpose of redesigning the course so that it meets the needs of the student. From learning theory, it becomes apparent that certain tasks are best taught at specific levels of human development. For instance, composition skills are introduced at the elementary level. They are reviewed, reinforced, and expanded during grades 7-9. In reality, introducing composition skills above the ninth-grade level is remedial! An advisory committee that represents education at all levels permits teachers to see what the students' needs are and how the educator, at his particular level, can complement and enhance the efforts of those instructors who precede (as well as those educators who follow) in the sequence of educating students. If educators are the professionals we all consider ourselves to be, we will redesign our composition courses so that the student progresses in an orderly, systematic, and appropriate manner to perform the various tasks which represent his goal.

The results of the present research in the Lane County, Oregon area have reinforced what most of us already believed about English composition skills. There is a basis or foundation of expository composition skills which are necessary for ALL students--be they transfer, terminal, general, vocational, or re-training. Expository writing rates high in importance among vocational students--higher than all levels except high school educators anticipated.

Several methods were suggested to insure that English composition courses are well grounded. Suggestions for obtaining feedback include surveying the needs of people who use it, inviting former students to the class, utilizing advisory committees which include members of the business community and recent graduates. In addition, the advisory committee should include

levels of educators above and below that which is being taught. Such a representative advisory committee would help insure that a consistent, systematic, and appropriate course of well grounded material is offered. We have evidence that the students perceive their communication needs. Further, they want well grounded courses. We also have several ways to identify what the students' needs and level of needs are. Through well grounded English composition courses, the student is assisted in his development of logical thinking, of value-setting, and of critical analysis--all of which are necessary to the well grounded individual in the larger community to make his life and to make his living.

Notes and References

[1] Jeane L. Dille, The Identification of Verbal, Handwriting, and Written Composition Skills and the Level of Those Skills Required by Entry-Level Industrial Mechanics, Ed.D. dissertation, Oregon State University, 1975 (available from ERIC).

[2] Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Wiener, The Year 2000, The Macmillan Co., New York, NY, 1967.

[3] James R. Nord, Communications Skills Project/Lane Community College, Eugene, Oregon, Educational Coordinating Council, Monmouth, Oregon, 1971.

[4] Permission of Priscilla Hardin, Instructional Developer, Learning Resource Center, Department of Vocational Education, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon.